

INPLASY202550042
doi: 10.37766/inplasy2025.5.0042
Received: 15 May 2025
Published: 15 May 2025

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Contact between incarcerated parents and their minor children and individual, family and contextual correlates: a systematic review protocol

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ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Support - This project, reference M3.1.e/PROPINAS DOUTORAMENTO/017/2024 – ED.1, receives funding from the Regional Directorate for Science, Innovation and Development through the PROSCIENTIA Incentive System. This information will be included in all communication materials and dissemination of results.

Review Stage at time of this submission - Formal screening of search results against eligibility criteria.

Conflicts of interest - None declared.

INPLASY registration number: INPLASY202550042

Amendments - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 15 May 2025 and was last updated on 15 May 2025.

INTRODUCTION

Review question / Objective 1. How is the contact between incarcerated parents and their minor children characterized in terms of type, frequency, and regularity?
2. Which individual factors (related to the child and parent), relational factors, family factors, and prison-related contextual factors are associated with the contact between incarcerated parents and their minor children?
This review aims to synthesize the findings regarding the type and frequency/regularity of contact between incarcerated parents and their minor children. Additionally, it seeks to identify the individual (child and parent), relational, family, and prison-related contextual factors associated with this interaction.

Rationale Parental incarceration affects a growing number of children and adolescents worldwide, with well-documented negative consequences for their emotional, behavioral, and social development (Murray et al., 2012; Turney, 2021). Contact between incarcerated parents and their children is often encouraged to preserve attachment bonds and promote positive outcomes for both the parent and the child (Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2021). However, such contact is frequently inconsistent, limited, or disrupted by logistical, relational, or institutional barriers (Arditti, 2012; Foster, 2017). While the importance of maintaining contact has been recognized, the existing literature is highly heterogeneous in terms of how contact is conceptualized and operationalized or measured (e.g., frequency, mode, quality). Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity regarding the individual, relational, and

contextual factors that are associated with the frequency, regularity, and type of contact during incarceration. The only systematic review published to date focusing on this outcome has examined exclusively the experiences of incarcerated fathers, contributing to a gender gap in the literature and overlooking the distinct experiences of incarcerated mothers, whose imprisonment may have different implications for caregiving roles and child contact dynamics (Baldwin & Epstein, 2017; Poehlmann-Tynan et al., 2023).

A systematic synthesis of the available evidence is needed to (1) better characterize the nature of contact between incarcerated parents (both mothers and fathers) and their minor children, and (2) identify the key factors that are associated with such contact. This review will address these gaps by including studies focused on both male and female incarcerated parents, covering a broad age range of children and adolescents, and mapping how contact is associated with individual, family, and prison-related variables.

Condition being studied Contact between incarcerated parents and their minor children, and the correlates of that contact (individual, relational, family, and prison-related factors).

METHODS

Search strategy A systematic search will be conducted using Scopus, Web of Science, and EBSCOhost. The search terms will include: Father OR mother OR parents* AND child* OR kid* OR adolescent* OR youth* AND Incarcerat* OR imprison* OR prison* OR jail* OR inmate* OR penitentiary* AND communication* OR interaction* OR visit* OR call*. Searches will be conducted using filters available in each database: limiting to title and abstract fields, peer-reviewed scientific articles only, in English or Portuguese, with no date restrictions.

Participant or population Contact between incarcerated parents and their minor children, and the correlates of that contact (individual, relational, family, and prison-related factors).

Intervention Not applicable.

Comparator Not applicable.

Study designs to be included Quantitative observational analytical studies (cross-sectional or longitudinal) and intervention studies with a control group, when applicable.

Eligibility criteria This systematic review will include:

- a) Studies with incarcerated fathers or mothers of children aged 6 to 9 years and adolescents aged 10 to 19 years. All types of criminal offenses and sentence durations will be considered. During the study, children and adolescents should maintain some form of contact—either in-person (e.g., prison visits) or non-in-person (e.g., phone or video calls, letters)—with the incarcerated parent, regardless of frequency or regularity. Parents who did not have any contact with their children before imprisonment will be excluded;
 - b) Studies that inform about the characteristics of contact between incarcerated fathers and mother and their sons/daughters, such as frequency (e.g., number of visits, phone or video calls, letters), regularity (e.g., sporadic vs. consistent contact over time), and type (e.g., in-person, telephone, digital);
 - c) Studies which analyze the association between the type/frequency/regularity of contact between incarcerated fathers and mother and their sons/daughters, and individual factors related to the child or adolescent (e.g., age, emotional wellbeing, attitudes toward the incarcerated parent), individual factors related to the parents (e.g., sentence length, prior involvement, motivation to maintain contact), relational and family factors (e.g., quality of the prior relationship, caregiving support, family conflict), and prison-related contextual factors (e.g., geographical distance, prison policies, physical conditions for visits, or availability of parenting programs).
 - d) Quantitative observational analytical studies (cross-sectional or longitudinal) and intervention studies with a control group, when applicable.
- Only peer-reviewed scientific articles written in English or Portuguese that meet the inclusion criteria will be selected. No publication date restrictions will be applied.

Information sources Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost.

Main outcome(s) This review will assess the following primary outcomes, defined in accordance with the review questions.

1. Characteristics of contact between incarcerated parents and their minor children:

- Frequency of contact: Refers to the number of in-person visits, phone calls, video calls, or letter exchanges.
- Regularity of contact: Describes the consistency of contact over time, distinguishing between sporadic and regular patterns.
- Type of contact: Indicates the main mode of interaction (e.g., in-person, phone, digital/virtual).

These variables will be extracted as reported in each primary study. Information may come from self-report questionnaires, caregiver or institutional reports, or institutional records. Where applicable, the scale of response (e.g., categorical, ordinal, or continuous) and timing of measurement (e.g., during incarceration, over a specified period) will be recorded.

2. Correlates of contact characteristics:

This outcome refers to individual, relational, family, and prison-related contextual factors that may be associated with the type, frequency, or regularity of contact. These include:

- Individual factors related to the child/adolescent: e.g., age, emotional well-being, attitudes toward the incarcerated parent.
- Individual factors related to the incarcerated parent (e.g., sentence length, motivation to maintain contact) and relational factors (e.g., prior parent-child involvement).
- Relational and family factors: e.g., quality of the prior relationship, caregiver support, family conflict.
- Prison-related contextual factors: e.g., geographic distance, prison visitation rules, physical conditions, parenting programs.

The presence and nature of these correlates will be reported as defined in each study. Measurement may involve standardized instruments (e.g., scales for well-being or family functioning), institutional records, or structured interviews. Informants may include the child, parent, caregiver, or institutional staff. Response formats (e.g., Likert scales, checklists) and timing of assessment will be extracted when available.

Surrogate outcomes will be excluded. Only outcomes that reflect direct characteristics of the contact or its associated factors will be considered.

Additional outcome(s) No additional outcomes are defined at this stage. The review focuses specifically on the two primary outcomes: (1) the characteristics of contact between incarcerated parents and their minor children, and (2) the individual, relational, family, and prison-related factors associated with these characteristics. However, if consistent and relevant variables emerge across included studies that help to explain or contextualize the primary outcomes, they may be qualitatively explored to support interpretation. Any such exploration will be clearly reported and justified based on data availability.

Data management All identified records will be imported into Rayyan QCRI, an online tool designed to facilitate the screening process. Two independent reviewers will screen titles and abstracts, and subsequently the full texts, to

determine eligibility according to the predefined inclusion criteria. A third reviewer will resolve any disagreements.

Quality assessment / Risk of bias analysis The quality assessment of the included studies will be conducted using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklists, applying the appropriate version depending on the type of study design: the Checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies will be used for cross-sectional studies, and the Checklist for Cohort Studies will be used for longitudinal studies.

Two independent reviewers will appraise each study according to the JBI criteria. Discrepancies will be resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer.

Strategy of data synthesis A narrative synthesis will be conducted, organizing studies according to key outcomes of interest. Studies may be grouped by relevant characteristics, such as the age of the children, the type of contact maintained with the incarcerated parent, or whether the incarcerated parent is the mother or the father. Results will be presented using tables and detailed descriptions to allow for comparison across studies.

Subgroup analysis This is a qualitative synthesis and while subgroup analyses may be undertaken it is not possible to specify the groups in advance.

Sensitivity analysis Given the qualitative nature of this synthesis and the exploratory approach to subgroup analysis, sensitivity analyses will be considered if applicable.

Language restriction Only studies published in English or Portuguese will be included.

Country(ies) involved Portugal.

Keywords Incarcerated parents; child contact; prison; visitation; communication; systematic review; parental incarceration; family relationships; protocol.

Dissemination plans Publication in a peer-reviewed journal and dissemination at academic conferences.

Contributions of each author

Author 1 - Patricia Lima - Conceived the review; designed the review; drafted the protocol; responsible for study selection and data extraction. Email: patricialima1@edu.ulisboa.pt

Author 2 - Ana Pereira - Supervisor; contributed to the review design; critical revision of the protocol;

guidance in data interpretation and methodological decisions.

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Author 3 - Ana Gomes - Co-supervisor; contributed to the review design; critical feedback on the protocol; methodological guidance.

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